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HOW OLD WERE CHRIST'S DISCIPLES?

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This article is interesting if for no other reason than that it is the work of father and son. But it is more interesting in the fact that it shapes up and answers questions which must have occurred to every thoughtful student of the Scriptures. It is hard indeed to realize how much biblical thought has been misled by the painters of unhistorical pictures. It is hardly likely that all of our readers will agree with the conclusions which this article reaches, but that the disciples of Jesus were young seems well established.

Our mental pictures of the scenes described in the Gospels are greatly influenced by impressions that were received from the illustrated books of our childhood and by the way those scenes have been depicted by the great artists. Painters have been inclined to represent most of the Twelve Disciples as heavily bearded men, apparently in middle life if not beyond it, Peter and some of the others being bald-headed—a condition, it may be incidentally remarked, that would be strange in a fisherman accustomed to an outdoor life unless he was far advanced in years. John, indeed, is represented as being younger than the others; but even he, as usually portrayed, appears to be well over twenty.

Are such pictures true to the facts? How old were these men? In examining the Gospels for answers to such inquiries we need not trouble ourselves much over questions of criticism. Even if a book was not written by the one whose name it bears, and even though a particular passage may be an interpolation, all with which we have to

deal are of early date and show what was believed by those who, either by personal acquaintance with the disciples or through what was still remembered about them, were likely to have right opinions on a matter of this kind.

I

It might help our study of this subject if we could be sure what was the fundamental nature of that group of persons about Christ, what object they had in view when they joined it, and what was the relation that he and they considered to be existing between them. Did these men at first think that they were joining a revolutionary party whose aim was the restoration of national independence? Was it the thought that Jesus was possibly the Messiah that *first* attracted them to him—a supposition which, with the current ideas, would mean very much the same as the preceding one? Rather shall we not assent to what Harnack says: "The relation of Jesus to his disciples during his lifetime was determined, not by the conception of Messiah, but by that of teacher"¹?

¹ *Expansion of Christianity*, Moffatt's trans., II, 1.

Teacher! Did the disciples think of themselves as entering what was literally a school—a school that, whatever were its peculiarities, was somewhat like others of its time? Certainly the words used to express the relations between Jesus and the Twelve are almost without exception the same as those that were commonly used in connection with education. This is somewhat obscured in our translations, and even persons acquainted with the Greek Language are likely to have their thoughts largely governed by the impressions they received in childhood from the English version. Probably few children when they read in the Authorized Version the word “Master” as a name for Jesus think of “School-master,” a rendering that would show more clearly the meaning of the Greek *διδάσκαλος*, though evidently less desirable than “Teacher,” which has been adopted in the American Revision. The word “disciple” early came to have a special meaning, so that we are almost unmindful that in the Gospels it signifies “learner” or “pupil.” “Rabbi,” according to Thayer’s *Lexicon*, means “my great one” or “my honorable sir,” and is there explained as “a title with which the Jews were wont to address their teachers and also to honor them when not addressing them.” Our English words “professor” and “doctor” do not start from the same thought, but in some connections they have a similar use. According to Schürer, the addresses *κύριε*, *διδάσκαλε*, and *ἐπιστάτα* represent the Hebrew title “Rabbi.”¹ If from childhood we had read a trans-

lation that used such terms as are usual in speaking of educational matters, many passages would have made a different and perhaps a clearer impression on our minds. Read some familiar verses in this way: “A pupil is not above his teacher” (Matt. 10:24); “His pupils asked him . . .” (Matt. 17:10 *f.*); “Privately to his own pupils he expounded all things” (Mark 4:34); “He taught his pupils and said unto them” (Mark 9:31); “His students said unto him, ‘Professor, teach us to pray, even as John also taught his students’” (Luke 11:1); “These things his pupils did not understand” (John 12:16); “The Pharisees sent their students, with the Herodians, saying, ‘Teacher, we know that thou art true and teachest the way of God in truth’” (Matt. 22:16); “Doctor, we know that thou art a teacher come from God” (John 3:2); “The Pharisees said, ‘Teacher, rebuke your pupils’” (Luke 19:39). The Old Syriac text in the Sinai Palimpsest adds to this last verse the clause “that they shout not.” How much this resembles a complaint to the head of a modern school when his pupils have been noisy on the street!

Edersheim, in speaking of the call of the early disciples, says: “The expression ‘follow me’ would be readily understood as implying a call to become the *permanent* disciple of a teacher. Similarly, it was not only the practice of the rabbis, but regarded as one of the most sacred duties for a master to gather around him a circle of disciples.”²

Many are the passages that describe Christ as teaching. In some of

¹ *The Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, II, § 25.

² *Life of Christ*, I, 474.

them we are told of his "preaching and teaching" as though there were a distinction between the two acts. He taught in the synagogues, buildings that were commonly used on week days as schoolrooms. It may be that in his long sojourn at Capernaum he had a class similar to those that were common among his people.

We thus see that the language used concerning Christ's relations with the Twelve and the larger number of persons who for a longer or shorter time came to him for instruction is almost uniformly such as is common in speaking of education. The bearing of this on our subject is evident. Schools are primarily for the young. Many of our encyclopedias quote the words of a Jewish writer who a little later than the time of Christ described the duties of different ages as follows: "At five, reading the Bible; at ten, learning the Mishna; at thirteen, bound to the Commandments; at fifteen, the study of the Talmud; at eighteen, marriage; at twenty, the pursuit of business. . . ." The *Jewish Encyclopedia* (s.v. "Education"), in speaking of "the last century of the Jewish state," says that schools for boys six or seven years old were held in all cities, and then describes what it calls "district schools." These were "intended only for youths sixteen or seventeen years of age who could provide for themselves away from home."

Not only are childhood and youth the natural times for seeking an education, but family cares and the claims of business make it more difficult for older persons to give themselves to study, even when there is the inclina-

tion to do so. We are told, indeed, that Peter was married. Perhaps the marriage of some of the other disciples may be inferred from Christ's words about those that had left children for his sake (Matt. 19:29; Mark 10:29; Luke 18:29); and in speaking to the multitude he mentions wives and children, as well as parents, brothers, and sisters, among those that must be hated by persons who would be his disciples (Luke 14:26). Also in speaking to the disciples he says, "Of which of you that is a father shall his son ask a loaf . . ." (Luke 11:11). It might, however, be argued, on the other hand, that this last verse implies that some of the disciples were not fathers, which would be somewhat unusual among adult Jews. The fact of marriage does not prove very advanced age, for, as shown in a quotation already given, eighteen was considered the proper time for this. McClintock and Strong's *Cyclopedia* (s.v. "Marriage") says of the period after the Exile: "Though, for the sake of preserving morality, puberty was regarded as the desirable age, yet men generally married when they were seventeen. The Talmudists forbade marriage in the case of a man under thirteen years and a day." Throughout our study it is to be remembered that the Jews matured early.

Matthew held some position in a tax-office, but without further particulars this tells little about his age, for we do not know how old a person would need to be for such duties. Matthew's making a feast in his house (if it was his and not that occupied by Christ) seems to indicate a person having a home of his own, though possibly the

phrase might be used if the house was that of his father or widowed mother.

If Simon the Zealot was connected with the earlier activity of the party from which his title seems to have been derived, he was a man in middle life; but the party was not wholly quiescent at the time of Christ's ministry. The designation may have been a sort of nickname suggested by his character.¹

II

Leaving for later consideration some possibly direct indications of the ages of other individuals, let us turn back to think again of the school, if such it was. Evidently it must have been very different from our modern educational institutions and unlike any Jewish schools of which we have clear information. One peculiarity was that for the most part it had no fixed abode. It may for a time have had its regular sessions in the synagogue at Capernaum. We might translate John 6:59, "These things he said in a synagogue when he was teaching in Capernaum," and so make it suggestive of a time when he was acting as a recognized teacher in that city. The incident of which the evangelist writes might easily be described in terms such as are used in telling of what sometimes occurs in

modern educational institutions—a division of sentiment among students, helped on by outsiders who have come to hear and criticize the instruction that is being given; growing opposition on the part of the educational authorities, who are troubled by the loss of students and by the reputation the school is getting as a hotbed of dangerous doctrines; the dismissal or the voluntary withdrawal of the teacher and the clinging to him of some of the students. In the verse immediately following the narrative we read, "And after these things Jesus walked in Galilee." Does this mark the time when Christ no longer had a fixed place for giving instruction? The Greek word *περιπατέω*, though used before, seems very appropriate here, as the school now became *peripatetic* to a greater extent than that of Aristotle, the students receiving instruction as with their Teacher they walked beside the lake, traversed the plains, climbed the mountains, or entered the courts of the temple. Sometimes the students were sent off without their Teacher that they might impart to others what they had learned. This combination of instruction and practical work was not wholly unlike what is now common in theological schools, especially in those of mission fields.

¹ Is it too fanciful to suggest that something student-like may be seen in the extra names borne by several of the disciples? In American colleges some men are better known to their mates by nicknames than they are by their proper designations. The present fashion is to give appellations supposed to be humorous; but a hundred years ago, when French skepticism was popular in Yale College, the students called each other by such names as Voltaire, Rousseau, etc. In the universities of the Middle Ages and among the Greeks we find a similar custom, the new name being sometimes given by the teacher. In the little company of the disciples we find Cephas, Didymus, Zealot, Boanerges, Thaddaeus, and perhaps other "surnames." Some of these are known to us by only single incidental references; it is therefore not unlikely that some names were used that are not mentioned.

So much absence from home would have been difficult for those having families to support, unless they were in fairly easy circumstances. We know that some of the disciples belonged to families having boats, nets, and hired servants, so that, if parents were ready to do without their help and to make other necessary sacrifices in order that their sons might be educated, it would be possible for the latter to leave home. If all of the Twelve or if all of the Seventy were adults having wives and children, the probability that so many persons could take up the wandering life is lessened. Even where life is comparatively simple, men cannot fulfil their duties to those dependent on them unless they are diligent in business. Though circumstances might justify a few individuals in absence from home, is it likely that Christ would call so many adults away from their families? Youths in their teens would find it easier to leave home, as did those that came from distant villages to the "district schools" of which the *Jewish Encyclopedia* speaks.

Acts 4:13, in which rulers, elders, scribes, and priests are said to have perceived that Peter and John were "unlearned and ignorant men," must be allowed to have some weight as an argument against the supposition that these disciples had such an education as we have described; but, just as the graduates of old and famous universities are inclined to sneer at those who have been educated in less noted institutions, the wise men of the capital would be likely to regard with contempt the learning of those whose education was so different from that

given in recognized schools of high grade.

Is it thought unlikely that persons under twenty years of age would be given the responsibility of going out to instruct others? Those who have knowledge of the opening of missionary work in non-Christian lands are not likely to be troubled by such doubts, for the first converts and the first preachers to their own countrymen are likely to be very young persons. Such are more ready than the older ones to listen to new doctrines and are likely to be the most enthusiastic in carrying the message to others. Among the earliest converts in Japan were some students who had been led by an American teacher to study the Bible and had thus become the objects of severe persecution. In 1876 thirty-five of them drew up a paper in which they pledged themselves "to enlighten the darkness of the empire of Japan by preaching the gospel, even at the sacrifice of life." Some of them were cast out from their homes and formed the first class of the first school that was organized to train men for the Christian ministry. While still in that school they engaged in evangelistic work and laid the foundations of what are now strong Kumiai (Congregational) churches. Three of these men are today among the most prominent Christian workers in Japan. The names of these three and of five others of the band are given in *Who's Who in Japan*. The dates of birth for seven of these are given, showing that at the time of signing the pledge one of them was nineteen years old, two were eighteen, and the others were, respectively, seventeen,

sixteen, fifteen, and thirteen years old. All who signed were under twenty years of age and some were not over twelve.

Even if it is thought unlikely that the disciples regarded Christ somewhat in the light of a school teacher, the instances that have just been cited and others to be found in the history of religion show how probable it is that comparatively young people would be the ones most readily attracted to him as a religious reformer or as a proclaimer of new doctrines. It is hard for such a person to gain the approval or even the respectful attention of those older than himself. It is almost certain that the first adherents will be younger than he is. As Christ began his public ministry when thirty years of age, his early followers would probably be some years younger.

III

Another consideration may have a little weight. As constantly exemplified in the history of the church, a large proportion of religious geniuses are men who as children were precocious and early manifested a special interest in religion: Melancthon, Calvin, Wesley, Jonathan Edwards—the list might be greatly extended with the names of religious leaders who were intellectually and religiously precocious. If any of those just mentioned had been boys living in Capernaum nineteen centuries ago, would they not have been among the most eager to receive Christ's instruction, and would he have rejected them? It is certainly not impossible that among the youths actually living in Galilee were some like these. Those who hold to the disciple John's

authorship of the writings bearing his name will at once think of him as such a religious genius who might well for that reason be attracted to Jesus.

Let us now examine a few biblical passages that possibly indicate youth on the part of some of the disciples.

In the chapter where Matthew tells of the appointment of the Twelve he also gives Christ's words: "Whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you he shall in no wise lose his reward" (Matt. 10:42). Commentators seem to be puzzled by the words "these little ones." Some think there is an allusion to the future low and despised condition of the disciples; others, that the allusion is to their littleness in the eyes of the world. Alford thinks that some children may have been present. Mark, however, makes the words refer to the disciples, "Whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink because ye are Christ's," and adds the verse beginning, "And whosoever shall cause one of these little ones that believe on me to stumble" (Mark 9:41, 42). May it be that, as often happens in a school, there were two or three pupils considerably younger than the others so that Jesus might speak of them much as we do of "the little boys"? If so, our fancy might paint the scene somewhat as follows: Jesus, as he is speaking to a group of youths, throws his arms about two of them, lads perhaps thirteen or fourteen years old, as he says in familiar, affectionate, half-playful words what might be paraphrased in our English colloquial language as, "If anybody gives even a drink of water to one of you little

fellows because you are my pupils, his kindness will be rewarded; but if anybody trips up one of these little chaps, it would be better for that man if somebody had hung a millstone to his neck and flung him into the sea."

But who, according to this view, would be the little ones of the company? Tradition has always considered John one of the youngest of the Twelve. Some of the church fathers speak of his comparative youth, and even the word "boy" (*puer*) is used of him.¹ His name usually comes after that of James, implying that he was the younger of the brothers. The frequent use of the phrase "sons of Zebedee" may possibly (though we should not give much weight to the suggestion) be much like the way in which we speak of two brothers as "the Smith boys" or "the Brown boys"—designations that sometimes continue to be applied to adults by those who had known them in early life, but are more likely to be used only while the persons are still young.

There is another disciple to whom is applied the very same Greek adjective that we have in the passage about "the little ones." Many commentators think that James the Less (Mark 15:40) was so called as being small of stature. This in itself might be because of youth. Others prefer the rendering "James the Younger," supposing the comparison to be with James the son of Zebedee. This would probably make him about the same age as John. Since, however, the Greek adjective is not in the comparative degree of comparison, why should we not translate more

literally? Then the title "Little James" would remind us of the way in which Jesus spoke of some of his disciples as "little ones."

Another saying of Christ may be worthy of study in this connection: "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou didst hide these things from the wise and understanding, and didst reveal them unto babes" (Matt. 11:25; Luke 10:21). The reference seems to be either to the Twelve or, as favored by the context in Luke, to the Seventy. The expression was probably influenced by remembrance of Ps. 8:2, "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise"—a passage which Jesus quoted directly when the children (certainly beyond literal babyhood) praised him in the temple (Matt. 21:16). There was hyperbole then in such use of the words, and there was here in Jesus' speaking of any of his disciples as babes; but the term seems ludicrously inappropriate if applied by a man little over thirty years of age to the bald-headed veterans by whom the artists would surround him, but not so inappropriate if some of the group were not far along in their teens.

In John 13:33 Jesus addresses the disciples as "little children." The same term is used for those to whom the First Epistle of John was addressed, most of whom were probably adults; but, if as generally supposed, the writer was an aged man, he might well use it for those who were nearly all much younger than himself. It seems less appropriate for Jesus to use it if speaking

¹ Farrar in *The Early Days of Christianity*, II, 111, gives as references Paulin. Nol. Ep. 51; Ambros. *Offic.* ii. 20, §101; Aug. *Contra. Faust.* xxx. 4; Jer. *Adv. Jovin.* i. 26.

to persons nearly or quite as old as himself.

Another verse to be considered is John 21:5, where Jesus using the word *παῖδα* called to his disciples in the boat, asking, "Children, have ye aught to eat?" If we again use familiar language, it is as though Jesus called out in a cheery way, "Boys, have you caught any fish yet?" Here again we find an expression that seems more appropriate if addressed to persons younger than the speaker.

Jesus loved the young. He took the children in his arms. He placed a child before those who asked who would be greatest in the coming Kingdom. He welcomed the praise of children in the temple. He loved the rich young man. Do we not find another marked instance in his friendship for the family in Bethany? If Lazarus was married, it is strange that his wife does not appear in the narrative, and we get the impression that the sisters had no husbands. It would, however, be unusual (unless it was because of leprosy in the family) for so many in one household to remain single after reaching the usual age for marriage, which we have seen to be seventeen or eighteen years in the case of men and therefore younger in that of women. Should we not think of the sisters as girls under fifteen years of age? A young girl would be more likely than an adult to make such a complaint to a visitor as Martha did about her sister. When we read that Jesus loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, we see another example of the affectionate delight that he took in the young. This could be without the restraint that Jewish sentiment would have imposed

if the sisters were adult women. Though the same verb is used of Christ's feelings toward all of the disciples, may we not think that where it is used with special emphasis concerning the one who leaned on his breast at the Last Supper it has reference to that peculiar kind of affection that is more likely to be called out by a young person than by an adult? The important point, however, in connection with our present subject is that, as Jesus was so attracted toward the young, they must have been strongly attracted to him, and it would have been strange if among those most earnest to receive his teaching there were not some as young as those who in modern mission fields are likely to be among the earliest to become his followers.

What was just said about Martha's complaint being such as was more likely to come from a young girl may lead us to ask whether in what is recorded about the acts of the Twelve there is anything suggestive of youth. We will not press the points that it was very boylike to forget to take bread when going out on the lake, and that young people would be more likely than older ones to have an *open* quarrel over seats at the table, adults, while as eager to have the best place, being more likely to seek it in ways not making such an evident display of selfishness. Perhaps we should not make much of their fright when the squall burst on their boat as they crossed the Sea of Galilee. Dr. George Matheson, marveling at their abject trepidation, says: "Fancy a company of English sailors overtaken by a sudden gale and giving vent to their feelings in a simultaneous shriek of terror—'Save us, we perish!'" and he says that

this fancy "explains the mystery, for these men are not English."¹ That explanation may be pleasing to British pride; but, apart from the fact that not all of the company were sailors, may not the youthfulness of even the fisher-boys have made them more timid than older persons would have been?

There is one scene that seems more natural if the sons of Zebedee were young. In Mark's Gospel we read that they came to Jesus asking to be given places on his right hand and left at the time of his glory (Mark 10:35); and Matthew writes that their mother came with them and acted as their spokesman (Matt. 20:20). It does not seem likely that adult office-seekers would go with their mother to ask appointment and then put her forward to do the talking for them. How much more natural is it to think of the mother as going with two lads for whom she has high ambitions. If it is objected that she could not expect boys to hold high office, it may be replied that we do not know just what the desired positions were,² that Salome could hardly suppose that the Kingdom would be established until some time had elapsed, and that the mother of precocious children is likely to have exaggerated opinions of their capability. Some critics think that the addition in Matthew's Gospel to what is contained in Mark's was made from a desire to protect the reputation of James and John by transferring to the

mother the blame for presenting such a request. If so, the attempt to clear the disciples was not very successful; few readers have seen the brothers in a better light, for they are represented as falling in with their mother's desire and as bringing upon themselves the indignation of the other disciples. Even if the clause is interpolated, it is of early date, and the one who inserted it shows that his thoughts of the two brothers, whether received by tradition or otherwise, were of persons so young that it would not seem unnatural for their mother to take the lead in seeking official positions for them.

A painter then could find some reasons to justify a picture of the "Calling of the Twelve" different from those that we are accustomed to see. As we imagine it, Peter is the eldest of the group about Christ and is evidently taking a prominent place in it, as the oldest pupil in a school is very likely to do. He and Matthew are portrayed as being nearly of the same age, but each of them considerably younger than their Teacher — nearer twenty than twenty-five. With them are several persons of about the usual age of students in the "district schools" of that time — that is, not far from sixteen or seventeen — while still younger (how much younger shall we in defiance of our earlier conceptions venture to portray them?) are John and Little James. They are a band of students eager to

¹ *Representative Men of the New Testament*, p. 95.

² Is it possible that the places sought were those of cup-bearers or something similar? Such an office would seem appropriate for youths, but it was one that in some courts was held as very honorable. Xenophon in the *Cyropaedia* (i. 38) tells us that it was sometimes required of a cup-bearer that he should taste of the cup before presenting it. "Are ye able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?"

receive instruction from the wonderful Teacher who has aroused their enthusiasm and won their hearts. They are rejoicing because out of the many who for a while had been attracted to Jesus they have been chosen as the ones to receive further instruction and to be intrusted with the work of carrying his words to others. If such a portrayal of this scene could be proved correct, our mental pictures of other incidents and our thoughts concerning their significance would be affected.

In connection with this subject we may be led to ask whether there has not sometimes been expressed too much wonder that the responsibility for laying the foundations of the Christian church was committed to a band of obscure men whose most prominent members were "rude and unlettered fishermen." It may be a mistake to suppose that the occupation of the families from which they came necessarily implied low standards of life and thought. However that may be, we know that from humble homes and lowly occupations there have often come youths eager for an education who in spite of early disadvantages have attained a high degree of culture. Among the

Jews, indeed, they might as rabbis continue to carry on their former trades. The *Jewish Encyclopedia* (s.v. "Rabbi") mentions a laundryman, a shoemaker, a water-carrier, a sandal-maker, and other men of similar trades who were noted rabbis. It says that the elder Hillel once worked as a wood-chopper. In such a school as we have pictured, the intellectual powers of those Galilean youths would be quickened, their thoughts refined, and their desire for self-improvement so stimulated that the fact of their having been fisher-boys need not make it incredible that they should become intellectually fitted to move men's hearts by their eloquence, to convince men by their arguments, and to have a part in the production of the world's greatest literature either by direct authorship or by transmission to others of what they had received from their Teacher.

Many Christian ministers believe that work for the young is that which is most likely to give abiding results and those that are far-reaching in their influence. In this belief do they not have the same mind that was shown by Jesus when he chose the persons who were to be his chief disciples?